

ANTJE STRUBEL

translated by Margot Bettauer Dembo

from OFFENE BLENDE (OPEN SHUTTER)

Christine has been living in New York ever since she came to the U.S. illegally from East Germany in the mid-1980s and is working in a small theater. In the mid-1990s, when she runs into Leah, a West German photographer, she pretends to be an American by birth. But Leah finds out who she really is, and after tracking her down manages to break into the theater.

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In the morning, shortly before seven, when it's still quiet and the cleaning woman is the only one she meets in the hall, Christine goes up to her office to plan her day. The cleaning woman nods with every step she takes, flapping her hands back and forth to dry them off. Every morning the soles of her blue sneakers squeak along the polished floor. Then, firmly holding on to her pail and scrubbing brush, she disappears, and Christine takes the key off the board.

In the beginning, she used to sleep in the theater, in a dress that felt rough and heavy on her skin. During the day it hung in the huge closet on the other side of the room, where now only files are kept, files and a few pencil stubs. Jeff sharpens them till they're down to a fraction of a centimeter so he won't have to buy new ones.

Jeff, the smell of wood, and the squeaking rubber soles on the linoleum floor: these are more familiar to her than anything else in the world. She feels like an old woman and suddenly realizes why there are never any young people involved in the theater. Stage characters are either children or old people, never young people. One can't afford to wait around. Only children know that, and old people. They live one day at a time.

Christine closes the closet door, which had come open during the night. The room is already filled with glaring light that promises a hot day. There was a time when this would have bothered her. The blind is lowered halfway, and she stands there a while, gazing out at the empty street.

Somewhere in the house she hears footsteps; the sound is muffled and far away, as though coming through glass. These are not the footsteps of the cleaning woman. They're determined, marked by brief pauses, sometimes barely audible, and then suddenly very loud as though they were right outside her door. It could be one of the actors. But it's too early; rehearsals don't start till eight. Nobody walks around in the house this early.

As she always does, Christine had closed the front door behind her and checked to make sure it was locked before taking the key out of the lock. No one could have followed her in. Maybe there's a faucet dripping somewhere.

The file binders on her desk are a mess; one is tipped over. Christine picks it up, leafs through some pages, and puts it back, in line with the others. Jeff has not touched them for years. It's the deficits that make him do it now. The increasingly bad runs of the productions. He isn't one to rummage through the files and, as back then, she won't mention it to him, even though this time it's disquieting.

She can still hear the footsteps, irregular but persistent. A dull pounding. She listens for a while, can't figure out where they're coming from. They seem to be everywhere; on the stairs, in the hall, and inside her, in the rhythm of her heart, but that sounds the way it always does, even though without coffee it seems to be beating more slowly. The footsteps are outside on the stairs in her head; they run from one side of her head to the other, tapping, clacking against her forehead from within. Steps made by the broad square heels on a woman's shoes. Shoes that don't go with elegant stockings. Christine stands there, motionless.

Down on the street someone is fussing around with the garbage cans in front of O'Heave's store. Maybe the footsteps are those of the person on the street, even though the window is closed and only very loud and high-pitched noises can penetrate it. Outside it's midsummer; the heat has shriveled the leaves on the trees; the office hardly

cools off overnight. Only the basement rooms are still cool.

The heat explodes against the window, and Christine lowers the blind all the way. A person crossing the street in front of the building wouldn't necessarily have to stop in front of the garbage cans. Actually that would be rather unusual. Christine wipes her forehead. A single fine hair comes off, and she shakes it from her wrist. The woman on the other side of the street is clearly visible through the slats of the Venetian blinds. She bends over the garbage cans, and something red, scarcely longer than a few inches, sticks out of her closed fist—some sort of pliers she's going to use to break open the metal cable that holds the garbage cans together so that she can tip over one of the cans. Christine steps back from the window.

Now the woman's hand is hidden by her body, her elbow jerks, once, twice—it's hard to pry the chain open. She's probably picked up a special metal cutter somewhere; the cables around the garbage cans are about as thick as a finger and made of many strands of wire woven together. But, without the sound, her movements look easy. Outside the window, a web spun of sunlight. It must be a metal cutter. Or the kind that the workmen on the second floor use.

She's going to roll the garbage can across the street, then along the front of the building to the north side where there's a window, the only window that always has to be kept open because that's where the workshops are and where the turpentine, paint, and oil are stored.

There's a crash as the garbage can slides off the sidewalk. The woman drags the can along the street, looking around to see if any cars are coming. The street is deserted. The woman looks up, looks right at Christine. It's quiet inside the room. The woman. Her face is turned up toward the window. Leah's face. And in front of it the slats of the Venetian blind.

Leah rolls the garbage can to the middle of the street; again she looks up toward the window, leaning an elbow on the metal cover of the can. The handle of the metal cutter protrudes from her hand; she looks up. But she can't possibly see Christine; she can't possibly see what's behind the blinds, that is, see through them.

Leah stands in the street and suddenly the sun strikes her hair. She is going to roll the garbage can to a spot below the window and climb up on it, and she's got to have a rope at least, otherwise she

won't be able to get up to the window ledge. She's not tall enough to reach from the garbage can to the window.

She remains standing in the street, leaning against the garbage can, and passes a hand over her face. Then she turns her back to the window, tips the can, and rolls it across the street and up on the sidewalk. And now she's out of sight. Only the grating sound the garbage can makes is still audible, gradually becoming more distant.

By now Leah will have reached the wall of the house, will be taking the rope out of her pocket and unwinding it; that is, if she even thought of bringing a rope. —Why do you think I became a photographer, Leah asks. I could never remember any stories. I don't know a single story.

Then she'll try to jump up on the house wall. In the process she'll scrape her elbows. It's at least twelve feet from the ground to the second floor. But then there's also the fire escape ladder. She will reach the window ledge first with her hands. The touch of her hands is a blow that takes your breath away. The splinters of the wooden sill are dangerous, and she has to feel her way to the edge so she can pull herself up. Jeff may be starting to work in the shop around this time. Leah has to walk through the entire workshop. If she hasn't forgotten the rope, it'll take her almost ten minutes to get up to the windowsill. (Funny thought, breaking into a building in broad daylight.) It would be possible simply to open the door for her. But that won't do. That's out of the question. Christine moves away from the window and walks over to the answering machine to listen to the messages.

It's not certain what happens when Leah enters the house. It's possible that the telephone will ring immediately. Leah might also fall off. The windowsill is full of splinters. She won't think of that as she gropes along with her hands, but as soon as she feels the first splinter under the nail of her middle finger she pulls back. She sucks on her nail until the splinter slips out along with a little blood. She wipes the blood on her pants and pulls herself up onto the sill. If Leah is smart she'll stay hidden for a while and watch what's going on down in the rehearsal rooms. She won't understand any of it. For Leah everything has to be like a level plain on which you can see far into the distance.

I'm a tightrope walker, Leah says. She says it in German—*Eine*

*Seiltänzerin bin ich*—thinking Christine doesn't understand. Leah has slender shoulders and her lips feel like two sharp blades on Christine's breast, touching it very gently. Even though they don't rupture the skin, they leave lacerations. The closet is decrepit and creaks as Christine leans against it. But the doors smell of wood, and Christine pictures Leah who must now be lying on the windowsill, her body pressed tightly against it. Christine feels Leah's breasts. Her neck, which has a tan even in the winter. That's from jogging, Leah says; in Marburg I always jogged and at least the tan stayed, even if nothing else did. She looks down at herself and sticks out her belly. Like a child. And if people don't match Leah's conceptions, then she thinks they're out to hurt her.

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Christine thought of the time when she was a girl—eleven, twelve, or thirteen years old—as a “*Balzjagd*.” She had read the word somewhere, and for her it described the evening visits by the strange gentlemen to her living room.

“*Balzjagd*” is a term for the courting rituals of birds and fish during the mating season. The girl had read that in the dictionary. But the season of the visiting gentlemen was not limited; they came every Friday evening, for almost a whole year. In contrast to the birds, you heard them only when they were already standing outside the front door. They wore light-colored coats and did not argue. When her father opened the apartment door for them, her mother pulled Christine into the kitchen. At first the men only left letters on the doormat. Then her father would bend down and tear open the envelope even as he was looking up and down the empty stairwell. Although the gentlemen did not really resemble birds in any other way, still, they were as shy as the titmice on the balcony in the wintertime. The birds would pick at the outermost edge of the ring of birdseed the girl hung outside for them every week, and only after they had eaten all the way around the edge did they slowly approach the center. Sometimes the girl would run to the kitchen window so she could see the men leave. She could recognize only their figures, never their faces; the corners of their coat collars reached up to their ears. Then one day when the

gentlemen came right into the apartment, they first quite properly wiped their shoes on the doormat and pulled the rubber band off the carnation stems. They handed the carnations to the mother, red bouquets wrapped in shiny foil. As though they were apologizing for wanting to see the father rather than her. The father nodded and led them into the back room, and every time he passed the mother, he briefly touched her forearm.

The girl was annoyed that she had to sit in the kitchen because of these gentlemen and asked her mother to tell her stories. For every carnation there was one story. About a deaf opera singer. Or the fairy tale about the grandfather who owned a clothing factory. There, the grandfather made expensive, hand-woven fabrics and was well known because he could have any item of clothing woven in all imaginable colors and shapes. The shuttle raced across the loom, back and forth, and bore him into the international market. His weaving skill made him rich and famous, and he married a woman from the royal Saxon court kitchens. It was a colorful wedding. He had woven his wife into a dress of a hundred different hues. But when the war came, everything turned gray. Colorful soldiers did not belong on battlefields. He now produced coarse field uniforms in dark gray-green, on which he made no money.

Then soldiers wearing a different shade of green came to the house, and the factory was shut down for a while. The shuttles came to a standstill and the grandfather attended a training course. When the plant went back into operation, the looms wove artificial fibers and produced more in a minute than ever before. But the artificial fibers absorbed dyes unevenly, and when they were interwoven they turned into a fabric that looked faded and soon wore out. At this point her mother always stopped talking. They would be silent for a while, the girl gazing through the legs of the stool at the light blue linoleum floor, and when the mother began to wash the dishes, she could hear the gentlemen quietly walking past the kitchen door and down the hall.